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RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L HO CHI MINH CITY 000205

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SUBJECT: HUE ARCHBISHOP, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ON FATHER LY

REF: A) HANOI 407 AND PREVIOUS; B) VATICAN 46

¶1. (C) During a visit to Thua Thien Hue province on March 1 and 2, Hanoi and ConGen PolOffs discussed the case of dissident Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly with provincial government officials and religious leaders. Hue External Relations Office and Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) officials offered no information about Father Ly's status, but confirmed Ref A reporting that he likely will be prosecuted. They acknowledged that the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) is handling the case and does not normally "share information." CRA Chairman Duong Viet Hong emphasized that Ly was being investigated because of his political -- not/not religious -- activities. It was Hong's understanding that Father Ly had defied Vatican orders not to involve himself in politics. PolOffs told the Hue officials that Father Ly's situation is attracting the attention of the United States and the international community. We stressed that the USG supports the right of any and all Vietnamese to express their views peacefully. The USG is concerned about Father Ly's health, and the possible negative impact the GVN's actions could have on the atmospherics of Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem's forthcoming visit to the United States.

¶2. (C) In a separate meeting, Archbishop of Hue, Nguyen Nhu The, confirmed that the prelate is on a hunger strike, which is to last at least a month. The Archbishop thinks Father Ly's health is not yet in danger, but will soon be if he continues. The Archbishop confirmed that Father Ly has been relocated forcibly to rural Ben Cui parish some 20 to 30 kilometers outside of Hue in Phong Dien District.

¶3. (C) The Archbishop said that the government informed him that police found anti-GVN materials in Father Ly's living quarters at the Archbishop's residence. The officials alleged that the material "harms the great solidarity of the nation." The Archbishop noted that Father Ly was serving a five-year "administrative detention" sentence at the Archbishop's residence following his release from prison in 2005 and would now continue his "administrative detention" at the Ben Cui Parish. Although he personally "did not object" to Father Ly's freedom of political expression, he thinks that the prelate "exaggerates" about conditions in Vietnam and that his political statements are neither appropriate, nor accurate. The Archbishop echoed Ref B reporting that Church officials had asked Father Ly not to advocate for any particular political group or cause, and that Ly had disregarded these instructions. Overall relations between the GVN and the Catholic Church are good and improving, the Archbishop stressed. Other than monitoring Ly's condition, the Archdiocese did not plan to take any other steps to intervene in Ly's case.

¶4. (C) Thich Thien Hanh, a senior Hue-based monk of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, told PolOffs that, since Father Ly was detained, he has also noted an increase in the surveillance against him. Hanh thinks the action taken against Father Ly is an example of GVN backsliding on religious freedom in the wake of APEC and now that Vietnam is a member of WTO.

15. (C) Comment: The Archbishop appeared well briefed on Father Ly and was not hesitant to discuss the case with us. In seeking to improve relations with the GVN and advance its religious freedom agenda, the Catholic Church in Vietnam has long favored patience and gradual progress -- taking the long view -- over the type of sharper political action that Father Ly has undertaken. Whatever he may think in his heart of hearts about the Communist Party, the Archbishop's view is that the Archdiocese, and the Catholic Church as a whole, have far more to gain by seeking to work with the GVN in the realm of the possible -- such as resolving outstanding property issues, expanding Church charitable activities and increasing the number and freedom of movement of clergy -- than by tilting at red-colored windmills. We are somewhat surprised however, that the Diocese has allowed one of its churches to be turned into a de facto prison by the GVN. End comment.

WINNICK